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## Redrawing the Map: Medina on Epistemic Vices and Skepticism

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### Abstract:

My aim in this paper is to closely examine José Medina's account of socially-situated knowledge and ignorance in terms of epistemic virtues and vices in his 2013 book *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations*. I'll approach this task in two ways. First, I'll clarify Medina's account and offer a detailed examination of the similarities and differences between it and the two existing accounts of how social situation can bear on what subjects do and do not know: standpoint epistemology and epistemologies of active ignorance. Medina presents his vice- and virtue-theoretic account as capturing and integrating the insights of both, but I will argue that, for better or worse, his account differs from familiar forms of standpoint epistemology in significant respects, and so should be treated as a related but distinct approach to socially-situated knowledge. Second, I'll expand on Medina's brief suggestion that his vice-theoretic account of active ignorance reveals interesting analogues of traditional forms of skepticism about the external world, comparing and contrasting Medina's proposal with both other analogues of skepticism found in the philosophical literature on oppression and with traditional forms of skepticism inspired by Descartes.

...the contextualization of the process of acquiring knowledge within a social matrix opens a theoretical space for the consideration of socially generated illusions, in contrast to the wearying parade of elliptical coins, apparently broken sticks, afterimages, color-varying objects, and all the other bric-à-brac of putatively problematic perceptual phenomena marched back and forth the epistemological stage for the past few centuries. (Charles Mills 1988: 33)

## Introduction

My aim in this paper is to closely examine José Medina's account of socially-situated knowledge and ignorance in his book *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (Medina 2013). Medina's contributions to the debate on epistemic injustice have quite rightly been widely discussed and have had a significant influence on the subsequent literature, but his related account of ignorance in terms of epistemic vices and of epistemic advantage in terms of virtues has been much less thoroughly explored. I'll approach this task in two ways. First, I'll clarify Medina's account and offer a detailed examination of the similarities and differences between it and the two existing accounts of how social identities—race, gender, class, disability, sexuality, and so on—can bear on what subjects do and do not know: standpoint epistemology and epistemologies of active ignorance. Medina presents his vice- and virtue-theoretic account as capturing and integrating the insights of both, but I will argue that, for better or worse, his account differs from familiar forms of standpoint epistemology in significant respects, and so should be treated as a related but distinct approach to socially-situated knowledge. Second, I'll expand on Medina's brief suggestion that his vice-theoretic

account of active ignorance reveals interesting analogues of traditional forms of skepticism about the external world, comparing and contrasting Medina's proposal with both other analogues of skepticism found in the philosophical literature on oppression and with traditional forms of skepticism inspired by Descartes.

Here's a map for the discussion ahead. Section 1 sketches the main features of standpoint epistemology and Charles Mills's notion of active ignorance (in particular, white ignorance), and engages with the (rather neglected) question of how these two approaches to socially situated knowledge and ignorance relate to each other. Section 2 introduces Medina's vice- and virtue-theoretic epistemology and his account of socially-situated knowledge and ignorance. In section 3, I examine points of similarity and contrast between Medina and both standpoint theorists and Mills. I argue that Medina's account largely accords with Mills's, though it offers an alternative, vice-theoretic account of active ignorance. However, the similarities with standpoint epistemology prove to be more superficial; I leave it to the reader to decide for themselves whether this is to Medina's advantage or disadvantage. Finally, section 4 considers whether the epistemic vices that Medina focuses on give rise to new forms of skepticism which are, in any illuminating sense, analogues of traditional forms of skepticism about the external world.

## **1. Standpoints and Active Ignorance**

Standpoint epistemology isn't a single theory, but rather a family of theories that share certain core commitments. There are two core theses:

1. *The Situated-Knowledge Thesis*: Knowledge is socially-situated, in the sense that one's social identity systematically shapes and limits what one knows via the standpoints one can occupy.

2. *The Epistemic Advantage Thesis*: Some standpoints, specifically the standpoints associated with marginalised or oppressed groups, are epistemically advantaged (at least in some contexts, and with respect to certain subject matters).

So one's epistemic standpoint is shaped by one's social identity, and some standpoints are epistemically privileged. Alison Wylie usefully calls the epistemic advantage thesis an *inversion thesis* (2003: 26), which has the virtue of capturing its central dynamic; the epistemic order inverts the social, political, and economic order.

These two theses say something about the role that standpoints play in the theory, but it's not very informative on what standpoints *are*. Different answers are possible, but let us fix on one to have something relatively definite in mind. First, standpoints are sometimes distinguished from viewpoints or sets of distinctive experiences, which may be shared by all or most members of given social group. Experiences of a certain sort may provide the raw materials for developing a standpoint (an idea we'll return to), but the standpoint itself is an epistemic vantage point that's achieved through a combination of collective intellectual labour and social and political struggle (e.g. Hartsock 1983: 288). In addition to having experiences which differ from those of members of dominant groups, this may involve: collective reflection on these differences and disparities; seeing the relevant experiences in the light of feminist values and projects; noticing their prevalence and significance for

members of the oppressed group in question; developing apt conceptual and expressive resources for interpreting and communicating the experiences in question; and putting these epistemic resources to work in political struggle. The paradigm examples here are the consciousness-raising 'speak-outs' of second-wave feminism.<sup>1</sup> In saying that a standpoint is an *intellectual* achievement, I don't mean to suggest that the kind of analysis and reflection required will or should be carried out by academics (though some of it may be). As Patricia Hill Collins (2000) stresses, the black feminist standpoint has largely been developed and sustained outside the academy: by authors, poets, songwriters, artists, and others. Moreover, this is no accident, since academia has tended to systematically exclude black women and the knowledge they produce (2000: chapter 11). Both the examples of second-wave consciousness-raising groups and the intellectual tradition that creates and transmits black feminist thought bring out the sense in which the development of standpoint is a *collective* achievement, not an individual one. This will be significant later in section 3.

Alison Wylie (2003: 28) has articulated some additional claims which clarify how to understand the two core theses. One is that standpoints shouldn't be understood in terms of essentialised social categories. For example, some earlier versions of feminist standpoint theory appeal to the idea that women have distinctive kinds of experiences due to their role in reproductive labour, and this has sometimes been thought to problematically presuppose a kind of essentialism about gender, tying gender to certain roles in the division of sexual

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Potter 2006: 131-2 and Intemann 2010: 786, and on conceptual and expressive resources, see Fricker 2007: chapter 7 and Toole forthcoming.

labour.<sup>2</sup> Relatedly, standpoint epistemologists hold that there's no 'automatic' occupation of a standpoint in virtue of belonging to the associated oppressed social group; one doesn't occupy a feminist standpoint automatically in virtue of being a woman, for example. This is partly a consequence of a point stressed earlier, namely that standpoints are not mere viewpoints or sets of experiences.

Even having said this much, the two core theses of standpoint epistemology leave a lot of latitude in how the details are filled out. These details aren't our concern here, but I will offer two examples to give the flavour of the options here. Early feminist versions of standpoint epistemology, of the sort introduced in the previous paragraph, were adaptations or extensions of Marxist standpoint theories. The proletariat in a capitalist society can have a better understanding of how social reality functions, according to this Marxist position, since the division of labour along class lines ensures that they will be exposed to the real workings of a capitalist society, and in particular how such a society exploits the working class, and moreover they are not biased in favour of this exploitative system since they have no stake in its continuation—perhaps the proletariat can even achieve a view of how their society works which is undistorted by ideology.<sup>3</sup> Early feminist

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<sup>2</sup> See Wylie 2003: 28-9 for defence of early versions of feminist standpoint epistemology. against these kinds of objections, though as we'll soon see, she herself defends a different version.

<sup>3</sup> Yuval Avnir (p.c.) raised some doubts about the possibility of an ideology-free perspective, but these are doubts I share entirely, and so I won't attempt to defend this possibility. Following Jason Stanley (2015), I take some but not all ideologies to be epistemically flawed

versions of standpoint theory stuck pretty close to their Marxist origins, with the idea being that women were better placed to see how society really works due to their role in reproductive labour and other forms of invisible domestic work (see, for example, Hartsock 1983).<sup>4</sup> More recent proposals are that black women are better placed to see the true layout of social reality due to their status as ‘insider-outsiders’—as people who have learned to navigate the institutions and practices of the dominant social group, while still being regarded as outsiders to those institutions and practices, and while retaining the experiences and values of their own oppressed group—or as subject to the intersecting oppressive forces of both patriarchy and white supremacy, and so as immune to the distorting effects of being privileged by either of these systems of oppression.<sup>5</sup>

What about the notion of active ignorance? Again, we can discern two core claims. First, active ignorance is active in at least one of the following senses; either it is *intentionally*

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in that they contribute to active ignorance (McGlynn forthcoming), and I think the best anyone can hope for is to have a view of some area of social reality undistorted by flawed ideology in this sense.

<sup>4</sup> This is a sketch of the standard presentation of Marxist standpoint epistemology and feminist adoptions (see e.g. Tanesini 1999: 139-49 and Potter 2006: 133-5); I pass over the issue of whether this is the right interpretation of Marx’s own writings.

<sup>5</sup> On insider-outsiders, see Collins 1986 and 2000, hooks 2000, and Wylie 2003. For the idea that black women are particularly epistemically well-placed due to their experience of intersecting systems of oppression, see Collins 1986: 19 and hooks 2000: 16: see Curry 2017 for criticism.



brought about and sustained or it is self-sustaining, self-perpetuating, and self-defensive. Second, active ignorance in the relevant sense is linked to systems of oppression; for example, active *white* ignorance is ignorance that is ‘linked to white supremacy’ (Mills 2007: 15)). That’s vague, but some examples should help. First, we have cases in which ignorance is intentionally cultivated through destroying, rewriting, or simply not keeping records. Mills offers the example of the Belgium records of King Leopold II’s sickening legacy in Congo being systematically burned (Mills 2007: 29-30), and it’s not hard to think of contemporary analogues: for instance, the failure of the police or government to collect data on fatal encounters with the police, revealed after the fatal shooting of Michael Brown by Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri (Lowery 2017: 16, 111). In other cases, the mechanisms of active ignorance are quite different. Mills (2007) focuses in particular in the way that employing flawed concepts and conceptual schemes can lead to and sustain ignorance, without this being intentionally brought about by anyone; for example, employing the concept of a ‘savage’ or a ‘super-predator’ may distort not only the beliefs one forms, but even the experiences one has (given that one’s experiences are partly shaped by one’s concepts).<sup>6</sup> As with standpoint epistemology, there are a number of additional theses that flesh out Mills’s characterisation of active white ignorance; I will introduce some of these in section 3 below.

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<sup>6</sup> I borrow the terminology of ‘flawed’ concepts from Stanley 2015; see footnote 3 above.

See Tanesini 2018 for a detailed discussion of psychological evidence suggesting memory works in ways that promote active ignorance too.

Much more could be said about each of these approaches, but I want to finish this section by briefly addressing a rather neglected question: what is the relationship between these two accounts of socially-situated knowledge and ignorance? Mills initially presented his account of active white ignorance as ‘a “racial” version of standpoint theory’ (1997: 109). However, in his later paper ‘White Ignorance’ (2007), he seems less prone to identify his view as a version of standpoint epistemology, but he suggests that the idea of socially-situated ignorance is a familiar one, since it is ‘a straightforward corollary of standpoint theory: if one group is privileged, after all, it must be by comparison with another group that is handicapped’ (2007: 15).<sup>7</sup>

On the face of it, this later claim seems more plausible than Mill’s earlier unqualified identification as a standpoint theorist. It’s true that standpoint epistemology’s epistemic advantage thesis entails that there will be groups of people who tend to be at an epistemic disadvantage. But the converse seems questionable. Standpoint theorists don’t just say there can be groups of people at an epistemic advantage *relative to others* who are mired in active ignorance; as we have seen, they assert that there are particular epistemic advantages associated with certain standpoints (though they offer differing accounts of what those advantages are and what grounds them). We can partially close this gap by taking account of the fact that Mills advances his account of white ignorance as a way of spelling out the epistemic import of W. E. B. Du Bois’s well-known notion of ‘double-

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<sup>7</sup> That said, the 2017 reprint of ‘White Ignorance’ in Mills’s collected papers adds new section titles that weren’t in the original paper, and the section in which Mills introduces the notion of white ignorance is called ‘Folk Racial Standpoint Theory’ (2017: 53).

consciousness' (Mills 1997: 109: see Du Bois 1903/1996). The idea is that those whose knowledge and understanding of the social world is not limited by white ignorance are well placed to spot the disparities between social reality and the dominant fiction. They have 'alien' experiences, in Mills's term; experiences which 'lie outside the normal trajectory through the world of members of hegemonic groups' and which can 'redraw the map of what was thought to be already explored territory' (Mills 1988: 28: see also Medina 2013: 46). By itself, that's not enough for a standpoint—standpoints, recall, are collective intellectual and political achievements—but it does suggest that nonwhite people's tendency to be relatively free of white ignorance means that they are well-placed should they begin to engage in the requisite analysis and struggle.<sup>8</sup> Even if this doesn't suffice to describe Mills's view as a version of standpoint epistemology, it suggests that the epistemology of white ignorance and 'racialised standpoint epistemology' dovetail even more closely than one might have expected at first sight. It should also be noted that Mills has explicitly qualified his acceptance of standpoint epistemology's epistemic advantage thesis. The idea is that any claim about the epistemic advantages associated with oppressed social positions needs to be tempered by recognition that oppressed people, to varying degrees, internalise the ideology of their oppressors (Mills 1988: 26). Accurately describing the epistemic situation of the oppressed requires attentiveness to both dynamics, and their

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<sup>8</sup> The term 'nonwhite' is sometimes regarded as problematic (e.g. Eddo-Lodge 2017: xvi), but Mills uses it here precisely to denote a problematic construction of white supremacy ; I use it in that spirit also.

interplay.<sup>9</sup> I'll return to this point in section 3, since it is an aspect of Mills's views which Medina adopts, and which will prove significant.

## **2. Epistemic Virtues and Vices and the Inversion Theses**

Whether or not they precisely meet in the middle, in practice the two approaches sketched in the previous section have mostly theorised about knowledge and ignorance by focusing on different ends of social hierarchies, each defending a different 'inversion thesis', to borrow Wylie's term again. While standpoint epistemologists have offered proposals for how oppression might ground epistemic advantages, Mills has examined obstacles to knowledge that are predominantly (though, as we'll see, not exclusively) faced by those who belong to the dominant social group. Perhaps the most distinctive thing about Medina's account is that it offers an account of the active ignorance associated with dominant social positions and the epistemic advantages afforded by oppression which is, from the get-go, unified. The unifying thought is that different social groups tend to develop different packages of epistemic virtues and vices, and that these virtues and vices give rise to different epistemic opportunities and obstacles. In particular, we get two symmetrical inversion theses.

The first of these corresponds to the kind of ignorance theorised by Mills. The proposal is that those in dominant and oppressive social positions tend to develop certain epistemic

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<sup>9</sup> Compare Collins 2000, and for a recent debate, Stanley 2015 and Srinivasan 2016.

vices, in particular the vices of epistemic arrogance, epistemic laziness, and epistemic closed-mindedness. These vices give rise to ignorance; they are

deep and serious flaws in epistemic character that limit the subject's learning capacities and contributions to the pursuit of knowledge. (Medina 2013: 31)<sup>10</sup>

The next task for Medina is to show that there is indeed a connection between oppressive social locations and the three epistemic vices distinguished above, and to establish that these vices give rise to active ignorance.<sup>11</sup> Medina argues that those in dominant and

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<sup>10</sup> The assumption that we should think of epistemic vices as deep character flaws has been questioned (e.g. Cassam 2019). I'm sympathetic to these concerns, but I lack space to discuss the issue here.

<sup>11</sup> Establishing such a connection might seem like an empirical project, calling for empirical evidence, but that doesn't seem to be how Medina approaches his argument. I think there are other ways of conceiving of Medina's project where this isn't an obvious problem; for example, we can see him as constructing an alternative explanation of connections between social location and knowledge/ignorance already posited by standpoint epistemologists, to be evaluated with respect to theoretical considerations. Here Medina might cite his unified account of the advantages posited by standpoint epistemologists and active ignorance, integration with his account of epistemic injustice, his utilisation of a virtue- and vice-epistemology that many contemporary epistemologists find independently plausible, and so on. Of course, to some degree this simply pushes back the question, since we can similarly ask to what extent standpoint epistemology, epistemologies of ignorance, theories of

privileged positions will tend to be subject to less correction when they say things which are false or unsupported by evidence. This will encourage epistemic arrogance (2013: 30-2), where a subject overestimates his own epistemic powers, takes himself to know, and so to need of no correction or education, when he is in fact ignorant, and to be entitled to dismiss the testimony of people who are actually better-informed. Privilege also encourages the vice of epistemic laziness. Think of the examples mentioned above when we illustrated early versions of standpoint epistemology; on a Marxist analysis, members of the bourgeoisie in a capitalist society can afford not to know the ways in which the working class are exploited, and reproductive and domestic labour is often rendered invisible to men who benefit from it. More generally, Medina's suggestion is that privilege and power encourage 'a lack of curiosity about those areas of life or those social domains that one has learned to avoid or not to concern oneself with' (2013: 33). The people who have to provide such 'invisible' labour do not have the luxury of finding it invisible, of course. Alongside this 'ignorance out of luxury', Medina thinks we need to set 'ignorance out of necessity' (2013: 34), which he associates with the third vice of closed-mindedness. This is when 'one's mental processing remains systematically closed to certain phenomena, experiences, and perspectives, come what may, and that closed-mindedness erodes reliability, epistemic trust, and one's general capacity to learn' (2013: 34). Retaining one's privileged position (or at least doing so while

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epistemic injustice and the like are supposed to be empirically supported. There's a general issue here about proper philosophical methodology when we're engaged in non-ideal theorizing in epistemology (in the sense of Mills 1997 and the essays in Mills 2017), and I can't explore that issue further here, though it certainly merits attention. Thanks to Yuval Avnir for pressing me to say something about this.

maintaining a positive view of oneself) may require that one not know certain things about how one's privilege was created, how it persists, and the lives of those relatively disprivileged (2013: 35-6); this is the sense in which closed-mindedness enable 'ignorance out of necessity'.

These three epistemic vices give rise to *active* ignorance: ignorance that 'occurs with the active participation of the subject and with a battery of defense mechanisms, an ignorance that is not easy to undo and correct' (2013: 39). For example, if I am arrogant and closed-minded when it comes to the racial and gendered income and wealth gaps, I'll take myself to know the real explanation of the disparities—certain groups are lazy, or have a natural aptitude for lower-paying work, for example—and I'll be closed off from the real explanations. This will mean that I'll resist education on the matter, I'll ignore testimony from those who attempt to offer such education, and so on; my ignorance, grounded as it is in these vices, will be self-defensive and self-perpetuating.

Let's now turn to the other inversion thesis, corresponding to standpoint epistemology's epistemic advantage thesis. I noted above that Medina is offering a unified account of the two inversion theses, and in fact he offers a *symmetrical* account. The three epistemic vices that Medina identifies as largely responsible for generating and sustaining the active ignorance of the privileged are each opposed to an epistemic virtue which those in oppressed social groups will tend to develop, giving rise to a 'mirror-image' of the vices of the dominant (2013: 42). The virtues of the oppressed are humility, curiousness/diligence, and open-mindedness. In defending this inversion thesis, Medina argues that members of oppressed groups tend to develop these three virtues, and that they are genuinely

epistemic virtues: that they enable one to gain and retain knowledge. Unsurprisingly, his account here mirrors his account of the other inversion thesis, and so we can be brief. Humility involves recognising and taking account of my epistemic limitations and dependencies on others in ways that can facilitate learning (2013: 43). The flipside of the earlier point that the privileged will have a tendency towards ignorance out of luxury or necessity is that those in relatively unprivileged and vulnerable social positions may want or need to know certain things (often the very same things their oppressors ignore). Navigating the world, and perhaps even surviving encounters with members of the dominant group, may require building up a body of knowledge about that dominant group and about their place and one's own in the social order (Medina 2013: 43-4). Medina thinks that a tendency to cultivate the virtue of open-mindedness is likely to be necessary for similar reasons; oppressed subjects 'have no option but to acknowledge, respect, and (to some extent) inhabit alternative perspectives, in particular the perspectives of the dominant other(s)' (2013: 44). For this reason, Medina thinks that oppressed subjects tend to develop double-consciousness, in Du Bois's sense; they 'accomplish the epistemic feat of maintaining active in their minds two cognitive perspectives simultaneously as they perform various tasks'. Having experiences that are at odds with the perspectives of the dominant in society—having alien experiences—can encourage openness to the idea that there may be yet other ways in which the dominant narrative distorts things. Such an attitude of openness to other alternatives to the dominant narrative about how things are might be, or might become, an epistemic virtue of open-mindedness; double-consciousness develops into what Medina calls *kaleidoscopic consciousness*, involving open-mindedness to the plurality of 'oppressed and privileged perspectives' (2013: 44). Just as the three epistemic vices converge in active ignorance, the three virtues converge in what Medina calls *meta-lucidity*: a recognition of



one's own limitations and the sense of the boundaries of one's knowledge, together with the curiosity and open-mindedness needed to push those boundaries outwards (2013: 44-5).<sup>12</sup>

So Medina endorses and explains a version of standpoint epistemology's inversion thesis; however, like Mills, he qualifies this endorsement to avoid romanticizing the epistemic position of oppressed groups and their members (Medina 2013: 40-8). One way this is manifested in Medina's account is that he highlights the possibility that oppressed subjects may have an overabundance of the traits and dispositions associated with the three epistemic virtues just discussed. This means that they may be vulnerable to developing three epistemic vices which sit at the opposite end of the spectrum from the three vices that the dominant are prone to develop. Meaningful feedback on what one says and believes may enable one to avoid arrogance and develop humility, but an excess of epistemically undermining experiences may lead to self-doubt, and to one taking on board the perspectives of others—particularly dominant others—too easily (2013: 40-2). We'll return to this aspect of Medina's view in section 4 below, when we discuss the link Medina draws between epistemic vices and skepticism.

### **3. A Particular Brand of Standpoint Theory?**

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<sup>12</sup> Medina expands on his account of the epistemic benefits of meta-lucidity and double-consciousness in 2013: chapter 5.

The previous section only gave a sketch of Medina's account of socially-situated knowledge and ignorance, but that will have to suffice for now. In this section, I turn to comparing Medina's account to both standpoint epistemology and Mills's account of active ignorance. To be clear, my aim here is to locate Medina's account within the space of options by comparing it and contrasting it with more established accounts that he draws on. Where we find differences between Medina and these other accounts (and I'll argue shortly that we can find differences, despite a lot of convergence), it's not part of my agenda to try to resolve any resulting disagreement one way or another.

There are a number of respects in which Medina's account of active ignorance follows Mills's lead, beyond those already discussed. Recall that Mills's focus is active *white* ignorance—ignorance which is 'linked to' white supremacy (2007: 15)—though he does explicitly allow that there can be active ignorance that doesn't concern race, for example, what we might call male ignorance (2007: 22). Despite the non-accidental distribution of white ignorance, Mills holds that it is not ignorance found in all and only white people; nonwhite people can be susceptible to white ignorance (2007: 22)<sup>13</sup>, and it's a 'cognitive tendency' amongst white people rather than a cognitive inevitability (2007: 22-3). White

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<sup>13</sup> This marks a shift in Mills's views on white ignorance. In *The Racial Contract*, the emphasis was on the idea that the racial contract involves an epistemological contract: an agreement to 'misinterpret the world' (1997: 18). Since nonwhites cannot be signatories to the racial contract, this account doesn't explain white ignorance among nonwhites. The account in Mills 2007 is meant to apply even to some non-signatories to the contract. For a helpful overview of the changes which Mills's account has undergone, see Bain 2018.

ignorance is 'not contingent' (2007: 20), in the sense that its distribution is due, both historically and presently, to the workings of this system of oppression, rather than to the contingencies of the experiences, epistemic faculties, and circumstances of particular subjects. Medina's view parallels Mills's on both points. The 'epistemic disadvantages' Medina is interested in are not 'external or accidental' to those in privileged social positions (2013: 29). However, although there is a non-accident connection between being a member of a dominant social group and forming certain epistemic vices, that doesn't mean that all and only members of members of dominant groups will have those vices (2013: 40).

It might seem that Medina is simply offering an alternative account of the mechanisms underlying active ignorance, but I'm not sure that's quite right. It's not clear that Medina's vices can explain all of the examples of active ignorance introduced in section 1, nor does he claim that they can. He may still need some of the resources offered by Mills; for example, the notion of a flawed concept may still have work to do. However, this seems unproblematic for Medina. We just need to be aware that he may be supplanting Mills's explanations in some cases of active ignorance, but merely supplementing them in others.

The more interesting question is this: to what extent is Medina offering, as he at one points suggests (2013: 43 fn19), 'a particular brand of standpoint theory'? Recall that we characterised standpoint epistemology in terms of two core theses: the situated knowledge thesis and the epistemic advantage thesis. Medina's account gives us a version of the former; one's social location shapes (though it does not determine) what one knows and what one is likely to remain in the dark about, through shaping what packages of epistemic virtues and vices one is likely to develop. Additionally, as we saw in the previous section,

Medina offers a qualified version of the epistemic advantage thesis, arguing that the oppressed will tend to develop a certain package of epistemic virtues. We'll return to the qualifications Medina imposes soon, but for now let's continue looking at the ways in which he accords with standpoint theorists.

Recall from section 1 that Wylie drew attention to two important claims which spell out how standpoint epistemology's core theses should be understood; standpoints shouldn't be associated with essentialised social categories, and there's no 'automatic' occupation of a standpoint in virtue of belonging to the associated social group. Medina's account accords with both of these features of standpoint epistemology (2013: 191). It should be clear that there's no sense in which his account works with essentialized accounts of gender, race, and other social identities; rather, knowing is facilitated by a particular package of epistemic virtues which members of oppressed social groups tend to develop (but may not). And it's merely a tendency; members of oppressed groups don't develop these virtues automatically:

[the epistemic virtues of the oppressed] are not *automatic* features (they are not had by subjects just in virtue of their membership in a social group). (2013: 43)

One could be forgiven, then, for thinking that Medina's relationship with standpoint epistemology is roughly a mirror-image of his relationship to Mills's notion of active ignorance; he is offering an alternative account of its central epistemological dynamic, the epistemic advantage thesis, and he does so in terms of the epistemic virtues of the oppressed. This gives him a unified and symmetrical account of the two inversion theses—

Mills's and standpoint theorists'—in terms of the packages of epistemic virtues and vices that tend to be found among different social groups.

In the remainder of this section, I want to suggest that this tempting picture of Medina's accomplishments is wrong. One of the reasons it's wrong was stressed earlier; Medina qualifies his acceptance of the epistemic advantage thesis. Following Mills, Medina thinks that this thesis romanticizes the epistemic situation of members of oppressed groups, and so he is unwilling to assert that oppressed groups or their members have an outright epistemic advantage, on the grounds that 'conditions of oppression' can also create obstacles to knowledge (2013: 45). Some of the obstacles faced by the oppressed have already been highlighted, in particular the way that their confidence can be repeatedly undermined, leading to self-doubt, but members of oppressed groups also face familiar disadvantages when it comes to access to education, information, and other epistemic resources (2013: 29).

It's worth stressing just how far away from standard feminist versions of standpoint epistemology this point leads Medina. It's not that standpoint theorists wouldn't acknowledge many of the obstacles to knowledge identified by Medina; many of them are undeniable. But they will still insist that there are generalisations concerning epistemic advantages that can be made across social categories, and that these advantages are the product of *collective* intellectual work and struggle. Medina's epistemology seems very individualistic in comparison. Generalisations across oppressed groups 'lead to nothing but stereotypes, bad sociology, and bad epistemology', and what's needed instead is

examination of the ‘individual trajectories and epistemic characters of social situated subjects’ (2013: 45).

A person’s social location can influence their trajectory in predictable ways. Oppressed subjects are more likely to have the kinds of experiences that reveal the limitations and distortions of the dominant narrative about the social and political order: alien experiences, as we called them above. These experiences may lead a given subject to develop double-consciousness, and ultimately the kind of kaleidoscopic consciousness that comes with the openness to other perspectives encouraged by the virtues of humility, curiosity, and open-mindedness. This is Medina’s virtue-theoretic spin on Mills’s Du Boisian version of standpoint epistemology, discussed above. But nothing can be said about ‘*the* epistemic perspective of the oppressed or *the* epistemic perspective of the oppressor’ (2013: 45) since there are no such things. Moreover, exploiting alien experiences to achieve meta-lucidity and kaleidoscopic consciousness seems to be an individual achievement, not a collective one. To say that it’s an individual achievement is not to say that one can do it in complete isolation, since it involves developing certain attitudes and dispositions towards other people and the society one is embedded in: for example, an openness to the perspectives of non-dominant subjects and an appreciation of the partiality and distortions of dominant perspectives (2013: 203, 224). Nonetheless, it’s an individual achievement in the sense that it’s not necessary that anyone else *share* in the achievement; others are necessary only to the extent that they help supply the conditions under which one can succeed.<sup>14</sup> This marks a

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<sup>14</sup> An analogy may help. Becoming generous needn’t be a collective achievement; a single person might develop the right dispositions and act on them sufficiently often to count as

contrast with the kinds of contemporary versions of feminist and black feminist standpoint epistemology we started out with (though as Medina himself stresses, it's very much of a piece with the kind of view that Mills develops (1988)). The kind of epistemic advantages associated with the virtues of the oppressed are ones that one develops through one's interactions with others, but it's not something that one necessarily develops *together* with others; it's not a collective accomplishment the way a standpoint is. Given this, it's not clear to me that we should call Medina's account a version of standpoint epistemology, since standpoints seem to have dropped out, and instead we're offered an account of one relatively systematic way that certain individuals may be epistemically aided by oppression.<sup>15</sup>

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generous without anyone else becoming generous too. But if generosity essentially involves dispositions and actions directed at others, this isn't a virtue a person can acquire while isolated from all other people.

<sup>15</sup> The issue hasn't been considered much in the literature, but Tanesini (forthcoming) and Ashton (forthcoming) both count Medina as a standpoint epistemologist. I should note that although developing meta-lucidity and kaleidoscopic consciousness seem to be relatively individualistic achievements for Medina, there are collective achievements in the neighbourhood. In particular, Medina stresses that both effective political action and reshaping the social imagination are collective achievements (see chapters 5 and 6 of Medina 2013 respectively), that cannot be done by individuals alone—even by extraordinary ones.

I don't intend this as a criticism of Medina.<sup>16</sup> The discrepancy with standpoint epistemology stems from features of his account which he is very aware of and explicit about, as we have seen. Moreover, his worry about attempts to articulate group-level epistemic advantages is a pressing one, even if we're ultimately less pessimistic than he is about whether it can be addressed. Early Marxist versions of standpoint theory were criticised for making epistemic generalisations across whole classes, without taking into account the differences between those subject to sexist oppression and those not, and the point iterates once racist, ableist, homophobic, and transphobic oppression are factored in. Perhaps sufficiently broad and stable standpoints can be identified despite this worry (see e.g. Harding 1993), but there's at least some attraction to a view like Medina's which captures something of standpoint epistemology's appeal without having to confront such issues. In any case, as I stressed above, it's not part of my remit to decide between standpoint epistemology and Medina's account; my aims in this section are more modest. The moral I want to draw is that when we're thinking about where to locate Medina in relation to familiar versions of standpoint epistemology, it's a mistake to put them too close together. They share the same spirit and aims, and overlap in their commitments in important respects, but we need to recognise the differences are substantial, and they're substantial precisely in ways that make the 'standpoint' label potentially misleading.

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<sup>16</sup> In particular, I am not raising the familiar general worry with vice- and virtue-theoretic epistemologies that they are too individualistic, and so insufficiently acknowledge the role played structural factors and forces in shaping what we believe and for what reasons. I am satisfied with the response to this worry developed in Cassam 2019: chapters 1 and 2.



#### 4. Epistemic Vices and Cartesian Skepticism

Let me turn at last to skepticism. Medina's remarks about this are brief and rather underdeveloped, but I think it would be a mistake to dismiss them on those grounds. For one thing, they need to be seen in the context of similar remarks by other philosophers. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, a number of philosophers concerned with the impact of factors like race and gender on epistemology have drawn comparisons between certain kinds of situated knowledge and ignorance and Cartesian skepticism, though the aim of such comparisons isn't always clear. In 'White Ignorance', Mills describes the moment when Du Bois first realises that he is different from his peers and excluded from their white world as 'the black American cognitive equivalent of the shocking moment of Cartesian realization of the uncertainty of everything one had taken to be knowledge' (2007: 18). Rae Langton has made strikingly similar remarks concerning the moment when the myth of meritocracy is exposed as a myth for women and girls, likening it to 'that demolition, that shaking of established belief, which Descartes thought necessary for the acquisition of knowledge' (2009: 268), adding in a footnote that '[t]his thought motivates feminist standpoint epistemology'. As this last point suggests, the thought here doesn't seem to be particularly skeptical at all. Rather, it looks like both Mills and Langton use Cartesian skepticism as a metaphor, in order to dramatize the moment when members of disprivileged groups first have 'alien' experiences, to borrow Mills's apt expression again: experiences that reveal the rift between social reality and the dominant picture of social reality. This paper has examined different ways of developing the suggestion that such experiences might be the basis of some kind of epistemic advantage, as Langton suggests.

The idea that we might think of subjects in an unequal society as analogues of those trapped in skeptical scenarios is also found in Langton's suggestion that men's dominant position traps them inside a kind of 'sexual solipsism' (2009). In a typical solipsistic scenario, one is, perhaps contrary to appearances, totally alone. This might be put forward as a metaphysical hypothesis, but it can also be regarded as a skeptical scenario associated with the problem of other minds; how can I know that there really are minded-others, having mostly the inner lives that I take them to have, given that my evidence for this is fallible (consisting of observations of their verbal and non-verbal behaviour, their facial expressions, and so on)?<sup>17</sup> Langton thinks that men are often trapped in a kind of solipsistic scenario too, one which differs from the familiar one in at least two key respects. First, the solipsism is 'local' rather than 'global', since it only concerns a particular subset of people, namely women. Second, Langton's claim is not that women in fact lack minds (of course), or even that men lack evidence to rule out the apparent epistemic possibility that women are some kind of mindless automata. Rather, it's that men *treat* women *as if* they lack minds of their own, thereby treating them in ways one should only treat mere objects. Langton discusses several accounts of this kind of objectification; I won't go through these here, but one of them will provide a useful point of comparison with Medina's discussion below.

The forms of skepticism that Medina sketches are superficially different to any of these so far considered. Consider again the three epistemic vices that give rise to and sustain active ignorance, and in particular epistemic arrogance. Medina thinks that in its most extreme form, these vices of the dominant can lead to a form of skepticism about the external world:

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<sup>17</sup> For an accessible overview of skepticism about other minds, see Avramides 2011.

In the extreme case, reality in its entirety can be perceived by the subject as being at his disposal and will, as of his own making. This arrogant and narcissistic perspective can even be linked to an interesting version of skepticism about the external world: a version in which the external world has been swallowed up by the all-encompassing perspective of the arrogant subject who does not recognize any other authoritative perspective.’ (2013: 32)

There’s a flipside to this when it comes to oppressed subjects. Recall that the epistemic virtue of such subjects can be somewhat precarious, with the risk being that they develop the vice of self-doubt, and the associated vice of being overly deferential to others (the extreme form of open-mindedness). Medina thinks that there is a form of skepticism associated with such vices:

[T]he particular brand of skepticism that can be most peculiar of the predicament of the oppressed is not skepticism about the external world or about other minds, for indeed, oppressed subjects cannot help but feel, often painfully, the resistance of the world and the resistance of those subjects who subjugate them. If there is a form of skepticism that is characteristic of the oppressed, it is *ego skepticism*: a skepticism about the self, about its capacities and even about its existence. (2013: 41-2)

Unfortunately, this quote and the one above is everything that Medina says on the topic of analogues of skepticism stemming from the epistemic vices associated with oppressive and oppressed social positions. The details, and in particular the significance, of these

suggestions are left unspecified. However, let us see what we might learn from them about Medina's account of socially-situated ignorance, and about our own epistemic predicaments.

Let's start with the first passage, in which Medina introduces the 'version of skepticism about the external world' associated with the epistemic vices characteristic of privilege. There are at least two distinguishable ideas here. One is that the maximally arrogant subject views reality as being entirely of 'his own making', when of course it is not. This makes the arrogant subject a kind of converse of one of the solipsistic figures discussed by Langton (2009: 333-4). Such a solipsist objectifies women by forcing them to be and behave a certain way (to be submissive both in sexual contexts and more generally, for example), while treating these attributes and behaviours as 'natural' and immutable.<sup>18</sup> For such a subject, things (in some respects) are of his making, but he thinks that they are not. Medina's subject makes the opposite mistake; reality is not of his making, but he thinks that it is. However, it's not clear that the idea that reality is of one's making should really be treated as part of the maximally arrogant subject's epistemically vicious outlook; that doesn't seem to be a particularly *epistemic* form of arrogance, but rather a kind of megalomaniacal delusion.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, there is likely an epistemic dimension to this kind of megalomania.<sup>20</sup> Langton's solipsist may have a kind of 'maker's knowledge'—knowledge had in virtue of having made things a certain way rather than tracking how they stand

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<sup>18</sup> See Haslanger 1993 and Langton 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Thanks to Quassim Cassam here.

<sup>20</sup> Thanks to Genia Schönbaumsfeld for pressing me to say something about this.

independently—which he mistakes for knowledge of how things naturally are.<sup>21</sup> The megalomaniac makes a related mistake, taking himself to possess maker’s knowledge when in fact he does not (since things are not really of his making). Still, this epistemic arrogance is a downstream effect of a more fundamental megalomania, and it’s not clear why Medina needs to build this in to his maximally epistemically arrogant subject’s profile.

The second, more promising thought in the two quotes is the idea that the maximally arrogant subject has lost all contact with how things stand in the world, while taking himself to be the only one who knows (and the only one who *can* know) how things are. The world and its other denizens are providing no epistemic ‘resistance’ to such a subject, and so the world slips right by. It’s here that we find the connection with the subjects in Cartesian skeptical scenarios. They too are detached from reality, though in a rather different way. As Crispin Wright explains, the Cartesian skeptic ‘makes a case that it is a cornerstone for a large class of our beliefs that we are not cognitively disabled or detached from reality in a certain way—the scenarios of a persistent coherent dream or hallucination, persistent deception by a *malin genie*, the envatment of a disembodied brain, and ‘The Matrix’ are examples of such detachment—and then argues that we have no warrant to discount the scenario in question’ (2004: 168). The dreamer and the envatted brain think that they are engaging, perceptually and doxastically, with the external world; but they are sadly

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<sup>21</sup> Mistaking one’s maker’s knowledge of a group of people for knowledge of how they naturally are is, Langton suggests, a key component of *objectifying* that group (Langton 2009). However, it’s controversial whether this kind of ‘maker’s knowledge’ really is knowledge (e.g. Saul 2011).

mistaken. Medina is suggesting that a sufficiently arrogant subject doesn't fare much better; far from knowing it all, such a subject is trapped within their own biases, fantasies, and unrecognized epistemic limitations, while the world recedes out of view.

However, while the quote from Wright illustrates a point of contact between Medina's maximally arrogant subject and Cartesian skepticism, it equally illustrates the crucial difference. The Cartesian scenarios of detachment from the external world are playing the role of *skeptical scenarios* in familiar arguments for external world skepticism, the thesis that we can't have (or rationally claim to have) knowledge or justified belief concerning the external world. They are supposed to illustrate that one could be detached from the external world in ways that are imperceptible, and so in ways that one's evidence fails to rule out.<sup>22</sup> Since one's perceptual evidence fails to rule out that one is detached in this way, this calls into question our claims to know anything about the external world on the basis of such evidence.<sup>23</sup> This doesn't seem to be what Medina has in mind; he's not naturally read as suggesting that we can't rule out that we're detached from the world in the way that his maximally arrogant subject is, nor is this suggestion very plausible. Neither is the figure one which we need to guard against becoming: an epistemic cautionary tale, so to speak. That's because Medina's character is so extreme; Medina depicts someone who thinks that they

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<sup>22</sup> I say more about how we should understand skeptical scenarios in McGlynn 2018.

<sup>23</sup> This is of course just a rough sketch of one standard form that Cartesian skeptical arguments take.

are the only epistemic authority *on any topic whatsoever*. It's unlikely to seem like a serious worry that one might either be or find oneself becoming this epistemically vicious.<sup>24</sup>

That said, something that looks more like a version of more familiar skeptical worries has started to creep into view. One can no doubt rule out that one is the narcissistic and maximally arrogant subject depicted by Medina. However, the worry might strike us that it will be hard to be sure on any particular issue that we're not being overly arrogant and closed-minded. One is confident that one has done due diligence—but of course that's just what an arrogant subject *would* think.<sup>25</sup> We may have, locally at least, lost the world. This possibility seems analogous, not to the kinds of global skeptical scenarios mentioned in the

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<sup>24</sup> The other skeptical figure, the oppressed subject in danger of losing their sense of self, may be more realistic, sadly: see Medina 2013: 42.

<sup>25</sup> This points to another sense in which the ignorance enjoined by an epistemic vice can be actively self-perpetuating and self-defensive: that ignorance can include ignorance that one has that particular vice. Cassam 2019: chapter 7 discusses 'stealthy' epistemic vices: epistemic vices (including arrogance) that get in the way of their own detection. He likens this to the Dunning-Kruger effect, where people's incompetence causes them to underestimate their own incompetence. For discussion of forms of skepticism about the external world with a similar structure to the Dunning-Kruger effect, see McGlynn 2018. Cassam (2019: chapter 8) also discusses epistemic vices that are 'resistant' in the sense that they interfere with strategies to eliminate them, or to reduce their epistemically bad consequences, as when one's close-mindedness and prejudice renders one unable to learn how to be more open-minded from others.

quote from Wright above—that one might be dreaming, or a brain in a vat, or ~~in~~ trapped in the Matrix, or the victim of a Cartesian demon—but rather to *local* skeptical scenarios such as Fred Dretske’s example in which the equines in the pen at the zoo are mules cleverly disguised to look like zebras (Dretske 1970). Local forms of skepticism seem less threatening to our epistemic self-conception than the more familiar global forms, but they arguably still pose a significant threat (e.g. Wright 2004, Smith 2016).<sup>26</sup>

Such reflections may prompt us to cultivate more humility, and to listen to those offering alternative perspectives with increased open-mindedness. Of course, Medina’s second skeptical problem reminds us that there are dangers in such openness too: one can be too underconfident and deferential, in ways that can become epistemically vicious. But then nobody said being epistemically virtuous would be easy.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Just how much of a threat they pose is controversial, and I lack space to take the issue on here. For further relevant discussion of the relationship between local and global forms of skepticism, see Pritchard 2012, Schönbaumsfeld 2016: chapter 2, and Gerken 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Cassam (2019: chapters 7 and 8) discusses possible strategies for recognising and working on our epistemic vices, as well as some of their limitations. Thanks are due to the audience at the *Epistemic Vice and Forms of Scepticism* conference at the University of Southampton in April 2018 and to Yuval Avnur and Genia Schönbaumsfeld for comments that have greatly improved the paper. Particular thanks are due to Natalie Ashton for getting me interested in these issues in the first place, and for helpful comments on the paper.



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